

Japan's Neoliberalist Offensive and the Military

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By John Junkerman

When Abe Shinzo was installed as prime minister in September 2006, there was some concern that he would push into high gear the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's proposal (announced in November 2005) to revise Japan's constitution and gut the no-war provisions of Article 9. He is, after all, known as a strong supporter of revision and often boasts that he inherited the DNA of his grandfather Kishi Nobusuke, who began pushing for revision of the constitution in the early 1950s. Kishi created a constitution review commission in the Diet (which proved fruitless) while he himself became prime minister later in that decade. Abe is eager to bring his grandfather's, and the LDP's, dream to fruition.

But Abe adopted a surprising and politically astute strategy, creating what is referred to in Japan as the "soft mood." His first overseas trip, within weeks of taking office, was to Beijing and Seoul to mend relations strained by Koizumi Junichiro's repeated visits to the controversial

Yasukuni Shrine. Abe himself has dodged the question of whether he'll visit Yasukuni in the future, assiduously avoided controversial statements, and, on the constitution, announced a go-slow approach that aims to bring about revision within six years (he assumes, with supreme confidence, he'll remain in office that long).

Abe's "soft" offensive (an opposition politician called it the "puppy-dog" approach) has reassured Japan's neighbors and much of the Japanese media and public, but it has masked a very ambitious agenda, whose shape became clear in December with the passage of laws revising the Fundamental Law of Education and changing the status and mission of the Self-Defense Forces. It now appears that Abe's go-slow approach is based on the assumption that he can accomplish much of his agenda without revising the constitution.



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The LDP, in coalition with the centrist New Komeito Party, has a solid majority in both houses of the Diet, hence a free hand to legislate at will. Revision of the constitution, however, faces higher hurdles: a two-thirds majority vote in both houses of the Diet, followed by a majority vote in a national referendum. Though there is strong support for revision in the Diet, the public remains divided, especially on the issue of revising Article 9. Most polls show only a third or so of the public supporting revision of the no-war clause, and there is a widespread and growing movement to defend Article 9. A referendum at this point is no sure bet, so Abe's decision to go slow can be seen as a tactical move. In the meantime, as his first three months in office indicate, he is moving aggressively on other fronts that may pave the way for a future constitutional assault.

The Fundamental Law of Education came into force in 1947 as a companion to the Peace Constitution, with the aim of preventing the reemergence of the nationalistic and militaristic state-controlled education system of the wartime

years. The law embraced respect for individuality, the development of personality, and the nurturing of love of truth, peace and justice. It also contained a prohibition against "improper control" of education and the requirement that education be directly responsible to the people. Conservatives have long criticized the law, claiming that it overemphasizes individuality and forms the basis for "masochistic" education on the history of Japanese wartime aggression.

The revised law calls for cultivating "civic-mindedness [to contribute to the development of society]" and "an attitude that respects tradition and culture and love of the nation that fostered them." The latter language was watered down from earlier drafts that explicitly stated the goal of teaching "patriotism," but the aim is the same. At the same time, the requirement that education be directly responsible to the people was removed, shifting control over the direction of education from local school boards to the central government. What specific changes this will lead to remain to be seen, but the perennial conflict over the content of history texts, as well as the forced singing of the national anthem at school ceremonies give an indication of what is in store.

A recent analysis in the weekly *Shukan Kinyobi* revealed that 22 of 25 diet members in Abe's Cabinet, the cabinet secretariat, and his core advisory staff are members of one or both of two

ultranationalist alliances within the Diet. One is the Diet branch of the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, an organization dedicated to promoting “Japaneseness,” reverence for the imperial family, and worship at Yasukuni Shrine. The other is the diet members alliance in support of the Japan Conference, which is committed to the full menu of neonationalist causes: historical revisionism, revising the constitution and education laws, Yasukuni, and cheerleading for the Self Defense Forces. Before becoming prime minister, Abe served as secretary-general of both of these Diet organizations, as well as of the History Education Alliance, a Diet support group for the Society for History Textbook Reform, which has led the assault on textbook references to Japanese war crimes or what it calls “masochistic history.”

Given this “Cabinet of pals,” as it has been called—a group that is thoroughly dyed one color, speaking the same language in an echo chamber of their own design—it is not surprising that Abe’s close ally, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shimomura Hakubun would suggest (as he did in October) that the government rescind its official apology, issued in 1993, for the suffering of the estimated 200,000 Asian women who were forced to serve as “comfort women” for the Japanese Imperial Army. Despite archival evidence of the role of the military in running the system and extensive testimony from its victims, the revisionists claim that these women were

simply prostitutes like those that service any military force, and Japan has nothing to apologize for. As a result of this revisionist campaign, Japanese history textbooks, which had begun to address the story of the comfort women during the 1990s, no longer mention the issue.

With the revision of the Fundamental Law of Education, which passed the Diet on December 15, this effort to excise the uncomfortable history of colonialism and the Fifteen-Year War (1931-45) from the classroom can be expected to intensify. Japanese secondary schools already do a poor job in teaching modern history, but with their new mandate to teach “love of the nation,” the next generation will be increasingly clueless about Japan’s wartime excesses and the rationale for maintaining a Peace Constitution.

The upgrading of the Self Defense Force is the second prong of Abe’s campaign. Since its creation in 1954, the SDF has been under the administration of the Defense Agency, an agency of the Prime Minister’s Office, rather than being a full-fledged Cabinet ministry. This reflected its jerry-rigged status under Article 9 of the constitution, which prohibits Japan from maintaining armed forces. In the context of the Cold War, it was decided that military forces specifically limited to the defense of Japan were allowed, but they would operate under strict constraints.

In recent decades, those constraints were steadily eroded, resulting in the overseas dispatch of SDF forces, first to participate in UN peacekeeping operations during the 1990s and more recently to support the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Air SDF continues to fly supplies into Iraq from Kuwait, while Maritime SDF ships have been providing refueling services to coalition ships in the Indian Ocean since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. These steps have greatly expanded the activities of the SDF beyond its original purpose.

As of January 2007, the Defense Agency will become the Ministry of Defense, with independent status in the Cabinet. This has been sold as a measure to improve the morale of SDF members, who reportedly chafe at their perceived second-class status, especially when engaging in joint exercises with foreign militaries. This is not merely a symbolic move for the 240,000-strong military force with the fourth-largest military budget in the world. It is an important step toward institutionalizing and normalizing a military establishment within Japan.

While public attention focused on the status upgrade of the Defense Agency, the press has largely ignored the more significant companion revision of the Self-Defense Forces Law. This revision for the first time defines the SDF's overseas activities as one of its primary missions.

This ostensibly defense-only force is now charged and authorized to engage in military activities far from the Japanese archipelago, "in support of the peace and security of international society." Japan's support role in the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had required special legislation, as well as a tortured interpretation of the constitution, but these measures will no longer be necessary, as the overseas role of the SDF has now been solidified into law.

In parallel, upon becoming prime minister, Abe announced his intention to review the issue of "collective self-defense"—the doctrine under which an attack on an ally (the US) is considered an attack on Japan. Collective self-defense has long been understood to be prohibited by the constitution, but Abe has asserted that the constitution can be reinterpreted to make it permissible. Given the ongoing integration of the command and control structures of the SDF and the US military based in Japan, the foundation for collective self-defense is already in place. This last barrier to a full-fledged military alliance has been further eroded by Japan's deployment of the US missile defense system, which was accelerated after North Korea tested a nuclear weapon in October.



"We will not wage war. We will not have a military. That's Article 9." www.magazine9.jp

Few constraints remain on Japanese remilitarization. But there is one, and it is highly significant. The constitution states that “the right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.” Japan has a military. It will now have a Ministry of Defense. It now claims the right to send its military around the globe. But it doesn’t have the ability to declare war and it doesn’t have the authority to shoot to kill except in self-defense. Its military may be armed to the teeth, with the highest technology and lethal weaponry, but it is not authorized to pull the trigger. It can’t kill. For the present, Japan’s forces overseas are restricted to noncombat roles.



Japanese military convoy in Iraq

The authority to wage war is what Abe and his cohort want. It won’t come easily, which is why he is willing to go slow. But every step in that direction, from the ideological framing of history and education to the functional repositioning of

Japan’s military, creates a “reality on the ground” that is further divorced from the word of the law. Ultimately, they aim to make the disjunction so extreme that there will be no choice but to abandon the Peace Constitution.

John Junkerman is an American documentary filmmaker, based in Tokyo. His recent film, “Japan’s Peace Constitution,” has been screened widely in Japan by groups dedicated to defending Article 9. Most recently he edited “Gai Shanxi and Her Sisters,” a film by Chinese director Ban Zhongyi about “comfort women” in Shanxi Province; the film will premiere in Tokyo on February 17. Information on both films can be found at www.cine.co.jp. “Japan’s Peace Constitution” is distributed in North America by First Run Icarus Films (<http://www.frif.com/new2006/jap.html>)

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